End of an Era

Many of the shelves were almost bare, a few shoppers looked for bargains, and employees met with a representative of the Texas Employment Commission Friday morning as Safeway opened for the last time in Weatherford. The employees gathered in a back room to fill out forms for unemployment and to eat cake provided by a customer. The store will close at 6 p.m. today but last minute shoppers won't find many bargains. The stock will be transferred to the new owner, according to an employee.

Democrat photos
by Ken Galbreaith

Employees have mixed emotions over closing of Safeway store

By Robert Bradford
Associate Editor

Weatherford lost an institution today, a place where generations had come to talk and shop and buy bread.

Safeway, which has been been in Weatherford for more than 50 years, will officially close its doors on South Main Street at 6 p.m. today. The closure evoked mixed emotions from long-time employees at the store.

W.L. Leatherman, a purchasing manager who has worked at the store for 18 years, captured the general feeling of Safeway employees.

"I feel like all of the employees are stung by the closure of the store," he said.

Employees had been uneasy about the future of the store since the purchase of the Safeway chain by the investment firm of Kohlberg, Kravis & Roberts last year, Leatherman said.

Local Safeway employees are now concerned about future employment. Several Safeway employees said they have applied for positions with Level's Food Center, which has been taking applications in Weatherford for new employees.

Leatherman called his future employment possibilities "very uncertain."

In addition to questions about jobs, Safeway employees feel a sense of loss with the closure of the store.

Darlene Woodruff, who has worked at the Weatherford Safeway store for eight years and has been a Safeway employee for 20 years, said the employees have developed a close relationship which has been clearly affected by the closure of the store.

"It's just like breaking up a family," she said.

Safeway stores ring up final sales

DALLAS (UPI) — Cash registers will ring up their final totals at 6 p.m. today at 131 Safeway stores across North Texas from Big Spring to the Louisiana border.

The grocery chain's closing of its Dallas division resulted from the $4.2 billion leveraged buyout of the California-based company last year by the investment firm of Kohlberg, Kravis & Roberts.

The unstocked shelves are nearly bare in many of the Texas stores that previously provided jobs for more than 8,000 workers.

Employees at some of the Safeways are planning uniform-burning parties on the parking lots, while others plan to gather outside their stores for a quiet beer and a final word with friends and associates.

The displaced employees will begin lining up Saturday at special sign-up sessions for unemployment compensation. Few have found other jobs, the Texas Employment Commission said.

"Many may want to take a vacation and get their lives in order now. It's really stretching to think that many have new jobs right now," said John Thomas, the commission's employment services field assistant.

TEC officials said they do not know what effect the massive terminations will have on unemployment statistics in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, since it is not yet known how many of the workers will find new jobs.

Braniff International filed for bankruptcy in 1982, throwing 5,000 workers out of jobs and adding 0.2 to 0.3 to the area labor statistics for unemployment, said Don Johnstone, TEC regional labor market analyst.

"It will have a sizeable economic impact on Dallas, when you multiply the people by their weekly or monthly salaries," Johnstone said.

The ripple effect to those working for Safeway suppliers also will be considerable, he said.

The last working days for some employees, uncertain what, if any, severance pay they will receive, have been somber.

"There are a lot of tears. People are saying, 'what are we going to do? Nobody wants to pay

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